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Freedom Convoy plans to gridlock Ottawa until all vaccine mandates repealed

Up to 2,000 trucks are due on Saturday, but there will be events every day until the convoy receives an answer from the government

Rachel Parent
Jan 27, 2022 • January 28, 2022 • 5 minute read • 1557 Comments

Tractor trailers proceed westbound on Hwy. 401 on January 26, 2022, near Summerstown, Ont., on a route that will only get busier over the next few days as Freedom Convoy 2022 arrives in Ottawa. PHOTO BY TODD HAMBLETON/POSTMEDIA NETWORK

Editor's Note: The photo caption was amended on Friday, January 28, 2022, to make clear the main image was taken a couple of days before Freedom Convoy 2022 began to reach Ottawa.

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Thousands of vehicles could snarl Ottawa traffic for up to a week, with a convoy of truckers due to arrive as early as Friday — and some vowing to stay until they've successfully convinced the government to repeal all vaccine mandates.

The convoy was planned in response to a vaccine mandate that came into effect this month requiring unvaccinated Canadian truckers re-entering Canada from the United States to get tested for COVID-19

and quarantine. But the group is calling for all levels of Canadian government to stop the use of vaccine passports, waive fines linked to COVID-19 and reinstate employees who were fired for breaking COVID-19 rules.

"This is not about the vaccine, by the way. There's nobody in here that'll tell you it's about vaccines on this entire convoy. We've got double jabbed, we've got single jabbed, we've got no jabbed, we've got the boosted," said James Bauder, founder of the Canada Unity Foundation, one of the groups that is organizing the "Freedom Convoy 2022."

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We've got double jabbed, we've got single jabbed, we've got no jabbed, we've got the boosted

JAMES BAUDER, FOUNDER, CANADA UNITY FOUNDATION

"It's not about the vaccine. It's about the mandate.... We're done with mandates."

While truckers from Ontario will arrive in Ottawa on Friday, the majority will arrive on Saturday, and that's when the protest will begin in earnest, said Jason LaFlace, an organizer who previously planned events and protests for a group called No More Lockdowns.

"The first day is going to be the 29th. We're just going to go on a roll. And that will be the starting point, to get ourselves set up. On the 31st, the Monday, that's the first day of business for Ottawa and for us, us freedom fighters, and Canadians all across the country. And we're expecting a huge amount," LaFlace said.

The plan is to essentially gridlock the city, while leaving room for traffic to businesses and emergency vehicles to get through, LaFlace said.

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Ontario protestors who will be converging in solidarity with a convoy of truckers expected to arrive in Ottawa this weekend (Monte Sonnenberg /Postmedia)

While an itinerary hasn't been released to the public, LaFlace said organizers have arranged speakers — including politicians, truckers and Indigenous elders — and a stage will be set up in an undisclosed park on Monday. There will be events every day until the convoy receives an answer from the government.

A "memorandum of understanding," posted on the Canada Unity website, says its coalition is opposed to restrictions and mandates related to COVID-19, rules it deems are "unconstitutional, discriminatory and segregating."

The memorandum's goal, it says, is to form a committee with the Senate and Governor General to override all levels of Canadian government, and if they refuse to join, the group says they should "resign their lawful positions of authority immediately."

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Speaking at a news conference Wednesday afternoon, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said there was a "small fringe minority who are on the way to Ottawa who are holding unacceptable views."

"What we are hearing from some people associated with this convoy is completely unacceptable," he added.

Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said he is "concerned about the small number of far-right, vocal opposition that is polluting much of our political debate."

A spokeswoman for the Governor General said Rideau Hall was "keeping on top of the situation and waiting to see how things unfold."

The Parliamentary Protection Service said in a statement it was aware of the protest and was closely monitoring the situation.

Ottawa police are communicating with the organizers and planning for the arrival of around 1,000 to 2,000 vehicles, police said Wednesday at a special meeting of the Ottawa Police Services Board. Ontario Provincial Police warned that the convoy could cause slowdowns on all highways across eastern Ontario beginning as soon as Thursday.

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Ottawa police said that the Freedom Convoy had so far been peaceful and cooperative with police and city officials in other jurisdictions.

“We don’t have any risk information to suggest that people or business owners need to barricade themselves into their homes or businesses or that they need to close,” said Chief Peter Sloly.

But he warned that the protest could be accompanied by other elements, including counter-protests, which are harder to predict.

LaFlace and other organizers have emphasized that they are not planning violence.

We don't have any intent to create violence

ORGANIZER JASON LAFLACE

“We’ve been hearing things like, ‘Oh, you’re a domestic terrorist,’” La Place said. “We don’t have any intent to create violence.”

Tamara Lich, who organized the GoFundMe campaign that has raised more than $5.5 million, said in a recent Facebook video that convoy participants should report anyone who is “misbehaving, acting aggressively in any way or inciting any type of violence or hatred,” to the police.

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Tim Coderre, one of the organizers tasked with logistics, is working out of a school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., that Canada Unity is using as their headquarters. He said he doesn’t have a firm number on how many people will arrive in Ottawa, but reports from the road indicate that it’s a lot.

“All I’ve been hearing within the last couple hours is something in a range of 90 to 100 km of convoy. It seems awfully long to me and what I can tell you is that I’ve gotten call, call after call. It’s been nonstop,” Coderre said on Tuesday.

Truckers protesting a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for those crossing the Canada-U.S. border on the Trans-Canada Highway west of Winnipeg, Manitoba. PHOTO BY DAVID LIPNOWSKI /THE CANADIAN PRESS

Videos posted to social media have shown kilometres-long lines of trucks and other vehicles filling up highways, with crowds of dozens of people waving flags and cheering the convoys on from roadsides and overpasses.

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The convoy is scheduled to stay for a week in Ottawa, until Feb. 4, but Coderre says it depends on when or if they get an answer from the federal government.

“I can tell you that they’ve also vowed to, if need be, to stay for however long it takes for the mandates to be lifted,” said Coderre.

The Canadian Trucking Alliance has estimated that about 15 per cent of truckers — as many as 16,000 — are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19. It has strongly denounced any protests on public roadways, highways and bridges and has urged all truckers to get inoculated.

Chris Barber is a trucker from Saskatchewan and another organizer. He left for Ottawa on Jan. 24.

He said some of the truckers in the convoy are out of work, having lost their jobs because they can no longer cross the border, while others are taking time off to support the effort.

“It should be a personal choice whether they want to get vaccinated. If they haven’t done it already, they’re probably not going to do it,” Barber said.

“The narrative out there is that we’re a bunch of unvaccinated socialists and sort of separatists. I’m actually fully vaccinated. I have a passport with me right now, this allows me to do the things that the government says I can do. And that’s exactly what we’re fed up with. We shouldn’t have to have a vaccine passport.”

National Post, with additional reporting from The Canadian Press and Ottawa Citizen

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